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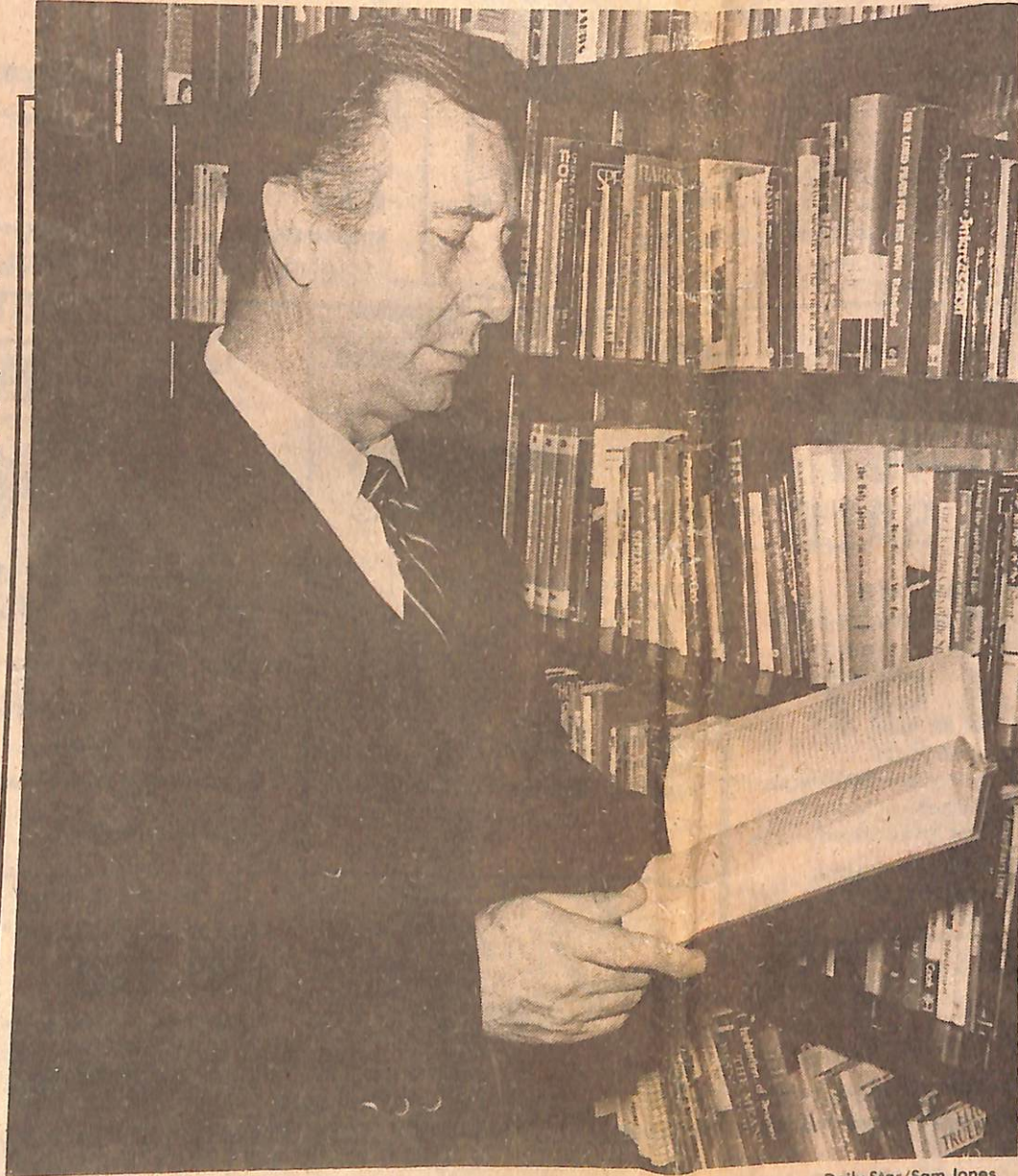
Pastors of First Baptist Shelby

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Joe DePriest

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Dr. Gene Watterson At Work In His First Baptist Church Office

Daily Star/Sam Jones

Watterson: Ministry Multi-Faceted Work

By Joe DePriest
Star Staff Writer

Daily Star Profile

This afternoon Dr. Gene Watterson is a comforter.

A phone call brings word a church member has died, so Watterson immediately goes to meet the family at Cleveland Memorial Hospital.

Before the day ends, Watterson's roles may switch from counselor and teacher to administrator.

"A preacher's job is multi-faceted," says Watterson, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Shelby. "The responsibility is always there, 24 hours a day, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

Sometimes Watterson thinks it is a sin to get paid for a job he likes so well.

Back in the days Watterson puffed Old Gold cigarettes, helped "rescue" a case of beer, forged his father's name to join the Navy and cursed his way across several oceans, preaching was the last thing on his mind.

Born 52 years ago in Decatur, Ala., Watterson spent most of his childhood in Birmingham. Watterson's father, A.D., ran a sawmill and building supply business with his brother until the Depression closed down the

operation. The elder Watterson moved his family to Birmingham where he found an \$18-per-week job as an electrician.

"Dad was a hard working man," says Watterson. "But he never complained. He had a positive, upbeat attitude." Watterson thinks he inherited that quality from his father.

The change from suburban school to big-city school wasn't easy for Watterson and his older brother, Doug. As newcomers, the boys had to prove themselves to a hostile student body. In that time and place, this meant "fighting every kid in school," Watterson says.

Every afternoon by the school flagpole, the Watterson brothers slugged it out with various opponents. The brothers lost more rounds than they won.

☆ See LOCAL Page 7, Col. 1

Local Minister Loves His Work

☆ From Page 1

"My father saw what a rough time we were going through and got a man who had once been a professional boxer to teach us how to fight," Watterson says.

The old pro offered some basic advice: Keep your hands up and your eyes open. Down at the school flagpole, the tide turned for the battling Watterson brothers.

"Our popularity improved almost immediately," Watterson says.

Watterson graduated from street fighting to the Golden Gloves boxing team. He also played football, baseball and ran track.

In the center of the Watterson family's world stood the Baptist church. "I grew up in the church and attended with utter regularity," Watterson says. "I learned scripture by the yards."

But Watterson didn't take the church very seriously. Mostly, it was a place where you behaved like a little angel on Sundays. Inside, you felt the same, which wasn't very angelic. Watterson took pride in avoiding parental capture when he skipped morning preaching services. Considering himself a fiendishly clever lad, he tip-toed to the sanctuary door and heard the conclusion of the preacher's long-winded remarks along with the final hymn. When Watterson's parents quizzed him about the service, he always had the right answer.

The ultra-conservative Watterson household not only banned smoking, drinking and dancing but movies as well. What would you do if the Lord caught you sitting in a movie? his mother often asked. When Watterson slipped into a theater for a Jesse James feature, he kept one eye on the screen and, remembering his mother's question, the other eye on the roof.

Several double promotions allowed Watterson to graduate from high school at the age of 15. He promptly forged

profanity spilling from his mouth.

"The day I was converted, my language changed," says Watterson. That day came in his senior year during a service conducted by a team from Baylor University.

"They were sharing what God had done in their lives and I realized God had never done anything in mine," says Watterson. "I had never understood the difference in belonging to a church and commitment."

Watterson made a commitment that day: He would be a preacher. He got a master's degree at the College of William and Mary and steered onward to seminary.

While training in clinical counseling at Central State Hospital in Petersburg, Va., Watterson interviewed a man who murdered four members of a family. "He was gentle and quiet," Watterson says. "He was an individual who had some loose wires and, like electricity, sometimes they sparked." Watterson considers his hospital training invaluable.

Watterson entered the pastoral ministry with an idealism "both naive and indescribable." He thought everyone in the church was a Christian. "That's a very bad error," Watterson says. "My idealism was unbounded. It was a real learning process."

In 1965, Watterson joined a ministry that took him to New Zealand, Australia, Vietnam and other Far Eastern countries.

After pastoring churches in Colonial Heights, Va., Crestview, Fla. and Jacksonville, Fla., Watterson came to Shelby in 1969. "This is the longest I've lived in one place," he says.

Watterson met his future wife, Yvonne Caudle of Petersburg, Va., during a church function. They have three children and one grandchild.

Since his Navy days, Watterson says he has set goals for himself and he has continued the practice.

"I have some physical goals — I try to exercise some everyday," Wat-

and, remembering his mother's question, the other eye on the roof.

Several double promotions allowed Watterson to graduate from high school at the age of 15. He promptly forged his father's signature and joined the Navy. "It was a world of experience," says Watterson. "I saw the world with its mask off."

In the Navy, Watterson made another major discovery — a frightening one: Despite a high school diploma he remained spectacularly ignorant. He began repeating four years of high school by correspondence course.

Watterson's brother had also joined the Navy and served on a sister ship. Doug Watterson was converted during that period and "He was a big influence on me," says Watterson. Doug currently serves as pastor of First Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tenn.

When Watterson entered pre-med at Samford University in 1950, the Navy lingered on his tongue. "I still cussed like a sailor," he says. Watterson tried unsuccessfully to plug the salty splash of

one grandchild.

Since his Navy days, Watterson says he has set goals for himself and he has continued the practice.

"I have some physical goals — I try to exercise some everyday," Watterson says. "And I have goals financially."

Spiritual goals can go in several directions, Watterson says. "First, a minister has got to know how to speak," he says. "I've studied speech and oratory. Second, he has to have something to say." The content of Watterson's sermons is broadened by his wide range of reading, especially in history. Also, he tries to re-read the Bible every 30 days.

"I take every speed reading course I can find," Watterson says. He slows down for pleasure reading and savors the rich prose of an author like Shelby Foote, whose Civil War trilogy made battles come alive for Watterson.

Another important part of any minister's spiritual goal, says Watterson, is living what he preaches.

"This is a rewarding kind of work, a changing kind of work," says Watterson.

Home 7